Introduction

The psychology of achievement has a long history, beginning with William James’ (1890) supposition that achievement and self-evaluation are linked (Elliot & Dweck, 2005). Current research on achievement has applications throughout psychology, but carries specific weight in learning, motivation, and leadership; many have used achievement as an anchor against which variables in motivation, locus of control, and the existence of praise and goals are tested. Achievement has become the measure by which many gauge the efficacy of programs and methodologies throughout a variety of disciplines, especially in education. Due to overlap between research on achievement and other factors such as intelligence, studies on the topic of achievement have frequently yielded results that are either controversial or in direct contrast to societal beliefs, e.g., the belief that parents and teachers need to praise children in order to enhance their performance and self-efficacy. The study of achievement, while frequently referenced in Educational Psychology, branches many disciplines and frequently has direct social and political implications.

Definition

Achievement focuses on the accomplishment or completion of a task. Researchers strive to uncover a variety of psychological factors related to achievement, such as beliefs regarding one’s ability to achieve a particular goal and the motivation to pursue goals. A person’s level of achievement motivation refers to the process of setting goals and aiming to accomplish what one sets out to achieve (Mazur, 2006). Achievement Goal Theory focuses on the reasons why individuals attempt to achieve something (Pintrich, Conley, & Kempler, 2003). Locus of control refers to the a person’s beliefs regarding how much control they possess over events, differentiating between those that believe they control (i.e., internal locus of control) and the events that are believed to occur because of what others do or what is attributed to luck or fate (i.e., external locus of control; Rotter, 1966). Research has revealed that perceptions of possessing an internal or external locus of control can affect achievement motivation; more specifically, internal locus of control is linked to the need for achievement.

Keywords

Achievement goal theory, locus of control, motivation, goal setting, stereotype threat

Traditional Debates

The debate over definition and measurement of achievement tend to be the main points of contention between researchers. For example, Zimmerman (2002) asserts that achievement is not solely tied to skills and abilities, but includes a person’s level of motivation and ability to self-regulate. Pintrich and colleagues (2003) point out that the validity of measures across studies is fundamentally difficult to judge based on the variability of the operational definition of achievement.

Critical debates

Current debates over achievement branch into several different areas, the most consequential of which deal with performance. Recent debate has centered on the “self-esteem movement” and the growing
consensus that children need to be reassured that they are intrinsically intelligent, with the belief that encouraging high levels of self-esteem will result in better performance. While many parents, teachers, and psychologists have traditionally thought it necessary to consistently praise the intelligence of children, research suggests that the praising of intellect (i.e., an entity-based approach) may actually serve as a detriment to the child. Praising a child for his or her intelligence might lead a child to conclude that performance is based on stable factors such as intellect rather than unstable factors such as effort (i.e., incremental-based approach; Mueller & Dweck, 1998). Employing such beliefs might hinder motivation and level of effort employed on similar tasks. People who have incremental theories of intelligence tend to put forth the effort that is often necessary to achieve their goals. For example, research reveals that when minority college students were taught about the importance of effort, they earned significantly higher grades than did their peers (Dweck, 1999). These findings emphasize the importance of determining the antecedents for achievement (e.g., motivation, self-regulation, self-efficacy), rather than promoting the idea that intelligence is predetermined and is a trait by which any individual should be evaluated.

Recent research on academic achievement has focused on the effect of possessing an identity that is stigmatized in the academia context (e.g., women in math and science). Stereotype threat, the fear of confirming a negative stereotype about one’s group, can have an adverse effect on test performance (Steele, 1997). The evaluation apprehension associated with stereotype threat can overtax available cognitive resources, which leads to lowered performance. Highlighting another self-relevant identity (often an achieved identity) that is not stigmatized in the achievement setting often buffers the effect of evaluation apprehension (McGlone & Aronson, 2007). On the other hand, pressures to fulfill other’s high expectations can have an effect on performance. Significant variability in achievement has been linked to birth, such that the first-born child is significantly more likely to achieve higher levels. The discrepancy in achievement between siblings is theoretically explained, in part, by parental expectations (Carducci, 2009). Discovering ways to lessen the negative effects of evaluation apprehension is an issue for future research, and has serious potential social consequence.

Recent research has revealed the connection between framing and achievement motivation (Hart & Albarracin, 2009). When primed for achievement, participants with high levels of achievement motivation performed worse on a task when it was framed as fun, than did those with low levels of achievement motivation. When that same assignment was framed as achievement oriented, the participants with the higher levels of achievement motivation performed significantly better, suggesting that it may be the approach an individual takes towards a certain task that determines their likelihood for success (Hart & Albarracin, 2009). The results of this study relay an important reality that is to be addressed by the educational community; conformity to a one-dimensional approach in teaching may not be possible, and adaptation towards each individual will likely yield the best results and levels of achievement amongst students. Future studies on achievement might take into account multiple personal goals and the contextual factors that affect achievement (Pintrich et al., 2003).

References


**Online resources**


Locus of Control Online Test: [http://www.psych.uncc.edu/pagoolka/LocusofControl-intro.html](http://www.psych.uncc.edu/pagoolka/LocusofControl-intro.html)